VESPER MEDITATION
March 14, 1979

We Americans, for obvious reasons, have a much shorter sense of history than British and European counterparts. The historic, long range significance of a place, event, building are not nearly as important - to us - as its immediate relevance, its impact on our lives in the present. I was reminded of that, and the way it bears our practice of worship, just last week. The ministers had been invited to lunch with Eric Routely, Minister of the English Congregational Church, Scholar, Musicologist, Professor at WEstminster Choir College who was visiting in Columbus over the weekend.

In the middle of our conversation Routely was commenting on worship styles and he evoked some pleasant memories for me by talking about Evensong: the late afternoon worship rubric of the Church of England. About the only people who attend, Routely reminded us, were American tourists who, almost invariably are disappointed. It is all so remote, distant and cold. The congregation are spectators - and for AMericans that is a bit difficult. The tourists want relevance, meaning, communication, something to think about, not mystical Gregorian chants from behind the chancel screen. Routely pointed out that some parish churches now distribute a little pamphlet, printed mainly for American tourists, which informs them, gently to be sure, that they have been invited to listen in on a conversation: a conversation that began a long time before they were born and would continue long after they die: a conversation between God and his church.

I was delighted with that little vignette. It has very little to do with my own Reformed theology of worship. But I've been thinking about it ever since, and have concluded that one of the reasons I love these simple little vesper services so much is that, for some reason, they remind me of the fact that humble little groups of men and women have been doing something like this every single day for nearly two thousand years: that we are responsible for a part of the conversation now -, but that it began long ago, and will continue long after we have finished with our portion of it.

— that — this is what I think worship is

With that on my mind I was intrigued when I turned my attention to the text for the day. It seemed more than ordinarily important to me to understand that we really are listening in on a conversation - that it has been going on for centuries, ~~but that the relevance we always demand from our religion will be authentic only insofar as we understand how this particular conversation got started~~. It began on the last night of Jesus' life.

One of the major assumptions of the New Testament writers was that their readers, in all probability, would shortly be dead, or at the very least, hard pressed because of their faith. The New Testament, at least in part, is an underground survival manual written for people who at any moment might be arrested and executed. Obviously, not much of that comes through when we read the words today.

Jesus, according to St. John, was still at the table of the Last Supper. Time was growing short. He was about to be betrayed and arrested. The last thing he will do before

that is pray - for his disciples. But, according to the author of the Fourth Gospel the last words Jesus said to his gathered disciples before the crucifixion were these -

"In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer. I have overcome the world."

He hadn't overcome anything - not in any realistic sense of the word. At that very moment the conspiracy to get rid of him had coalesced: one of his dearest friends was part of it. The soldiers were on their way: the officials had been notified, the jury rigged, judges paid off, all the gears oiled and he didn't have a chance. And these brave and true friends were about to abandon him. If he overcame anything it was not immediately apparent what that might have been.

Until he died, that is to say. And then it became apparent to friends and enemies alike that if anything the contest was a draw: this man climbed up onto a cross and embraced death in a way that alternatingly frightened and inspired them. They had watched in strange mixture of morbid curiosity and awe as he said "Father, forgive them" and "Into thy hands I commend my spirit."

Perhaps they remembered at that awful but magnificent moment "Be of good cheer: I have overcome the world."

They had watched him absorb - literally - in his body - the worst life can do to a man. And they knew that he was the victor.

"The most gallant words in literature" they have been called. Their sheer valor reduced Carlile to tears. And the Christian witness across the centuries, at its noblest and best, is the story of men and women, in all sorts of difficult situations, somehow overcoming because they knew that the issue had already been resolved: that their Lord had overcome the world.

Arthur John Gossip quotes an anonymous Scottish boy - about to be martyred: "God never guaranteed to keep us out of trouble, but he did promise to bring us through the worst of them. And he will do it." (I.B. Vol. 8, P. 741-2)

The New Testament is written after the resurrection, of course. What happened on Easter morning illumines everything which precedes it. But now, in the middle of Lent, hear these words - as they were spoken - before the crucifixion.

Jesus our brother overcame the world. The invitation is to share the spoils of his victory.

You and I are not likely to be arrested for our faith. But there is no one here who does not know what it means to be overcome by the world - for some of us that may mean a problem which resists our best efforts to resolve it: a relationship that will not heal: a deep anxiety that dulls every waking moment. You know what it is in your life.

Jesus Christ offers to share his victory with us. He has overcome.

Thus St. Paul -

"I am certain that neither death nor life,
nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present,
nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth,
nor anything else in all creation, will be able to
separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Thanks be to God!

Let us pray:

Almighty God, we have heard the words: we know the ideas: we have been told that in Jesus Christ you love us and give us pwoer to overcome the world. But sometimes, our father, it is hard to believe: and sometimes when we want to believe we feel selfish for asking so much, so personally, so immediately. So, in the silence of these moments together, confirm our faith - call out of us honest prayers: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

In silence - let us identify the problem - concern - anxiety - which is overcoming us. In silence let us ask God for help to overcome. Let us each pray silently.

Father, in Jesus Christ you have overcome the world. Hear our modest prayers: give us confidence that we share the victory: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Let us pray for someone close to us who is struggling to overcome - silently.

Father, hear our prayers for people who are dear to us: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Let us pray for peace in the world: silently.
giving thanks for what has transpired in M.E.

Father bless those who make peace. Give courage to those who seek peace. Comfort those who suffer and help us to be agents of that noble vision of peace on earth. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Let us return thanks now - for a gift we were given today: for a moment of unexpected serenity, a undeserved smile, a word of encouragement, an act of kindness, a joyful laugh - let us pray silently.

God our father, your goodness is revealed in many ways. Hear our gratitude through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Every Prayer